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Section: LIFE

New films make a splash

Andy Seiler

LAS VEGAS The Toy Story people may have hooked another hit in **Finding Nemo**. Theater owners got a first look at the latest Disney/Pixar film at the ShoWest industry convention, which ends today. Their prediction: Nemo will be as big as the four previous collaborations between Walt Disney and Pixar Studios (Toy Story Toy Story 2 Monsters, Inc. A Bug's Life).

Due in theaters May 30, Nemo features the voices of Albert Brooks and Ellen DeGeneres in the story of a widower clown fish who tries to find his only son after the small fry is abducted by an Australian dentist for his aquarium.

Theater owners could not suppress their enthusiasm Tuesday night after the film's first major screening, which got a classic Vegas introduction -- Robert Goulet performing You've Got a Friend in Me, accompanied by a big band, a line of showgirls and an explosion of fish-shaped confetti.

"It's a great film, phenomenal," said Millard Ochs, president of Warner Bros. International Theatres, which has theaters in eight countries. "It's a solid winner."

"It was excellent," chimed in Dan Harkins, CEO of Harkins Theatres, the biggest theater chain in the Southwest. "It was really well done. It tugs at the heartstrings. It's going to do well at the box office. It's going to be great summer fare. The exhibitors should be exuberant about it." Writer/director Andrew Stanton attributes the film's good buzz (and Pixar's winning streak) to a long writing and filmmaking process and harsh self-criticism.

"Nemo has been seven years in the making in concept, four years in serious production," he says. "There are a lot of rewrites, a lot of bad starts. We're the harshest critics we know, and we're always willing to change things at the 11th hour if a better idea comes along."

Other movies that elicited excitement at ShoWest:

* In America, due May 21, is director Jim Sheridan's (My Left Foot) film about Irish immigrants in New York in the 1980s. "In America might do very well," said

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Wendy McBane, manager of Central Coast Cinema in Atascadero, Calif. "It's a very honest, refreshing film." Added Mike Doty, general manager of the Jack Loeks Theatre in Mount Pleasant, Mich.: "It's not a blockbuster, but it's a terrific movie."

* Hypnotic, due in May, follows a telepathic American insomniac (ER's Goran Visnjic) hunting a serial killer in London. "I like scary movies, and this was a scary movie," said Leo Tocchini of North American Cinemas, in Santa Rosa, Calif., which operates 125 screens. "It's a cross between Silence of the Lambs and Scanners. It's a dream movie where they attack Freddy Krueger-style, but it's not as ridiculous as that." Said McBane: "It had me on the edge of my seat."

* Whale Rider, due June 6, is the tale of a girl who must win the respect of her grandfather and New Zealand's Maori tribe and fulfill an ancient legend. Whale struck many as a potential art-house hit. "I felt very close to the main characters in the movie," said Larry Haber, co-owner of the Destinta Theatres chain, which operates 85 screens in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. "I felt they were alive and human. There were a lot of tears, a lot of laughs, and the acting was terrific. I cried through the last third."

PHOTO, B/W, Disney/Pixar\ PHOTO, B/W, Newmarket Films\ PHOTO, B/W, First Look Pictures

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